University of Alberta

Through the Break : Jason Jumps In

by
Jason Snart

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of English

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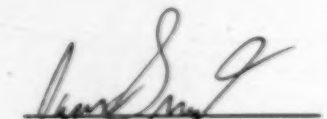

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Through the Break : Jason Jumps In* submitted by Jason Snart in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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People are told that they must never drink anything but a white wine with fish or a red wine with beef. The people who don't know, who've never been told that, who've never been educated along these lines - they drink anything. I suspect they get as much joy out of their eating and drinking as the other people.

- Duke Ellington, 1962

Abstract

Through the Break: Jason Jumps In is a collection of poetry which explores music, history—personal and public—and the singular events which connect to form individual and historical narrative. The song form arrangement reflects ways in which themes, words and events echo from one section to another as musical ideas do in song form to create a logical whole of separable parts. The idea of playing, or in this case writing, through the break suggests ways in which the poetic line can work in relation to standard grammatical sentence structure; musically, the melodic line is conceived against the expected four or eight bar phrase.

Acknowledgements:

acknowledge 1 a. recognize; accept; admit the truth of
(*acknowledged the failure of the plan*).
- Concise Oxford Dictionary

In truth,
Bert Almon,
Michael Roeder.

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A

The poet's depiction of it

or She
usually comes
long-fingered when
I am walking
along a back alley
near my house
wedged between
the freeway rushing cars
and other people's garages
with sunflowers growing
too close to the white fence
too high to have been planted
and one guy whose cheek bones
and chin form a hollow cross
is always working on his car
and the power lines
seem to be feeding me
or singing which inspires
poetry and headaches

Still life with sunflowers
copyright National Gallery, London

I searched Grolier's Encyclopedia
CD-Rom to find Van Gogh still-
life with sunflowers, detail
printed it to tack
to the wall. Van Gogh hung it
in the guest bedroom for Gauguin
visiting in Arles. A symbol, he felt,
hope and friendship,
a painting he was happy with

the printer speaks
an unimaginable language
but Van Gogh's sunflowers emerge
happily tangled in shades of brown and yellow

the original
hangs in the National Gallery
halls and sleeping guards a still
life of their own

the original
with thick paint writhing
towards the sun as sun
-flowers do
as the artist would sit in
S. Remy Auvers

all I could do was speak to it
unimaginative language
wish I could take it home
tack it to the wall
say, this is the guest bedroom
I've hung the sunflowers.

The Exaggerated Sky

Curved across
the patient sailcloth of night
an indifferent connect the dots
of narrative
history drifting
away from
original myth

Painted onto the dome of heaven
wet plaster on plaster
destined to peel
but too many years from now
to care about

As many stories as pages in a tome
tiles in a fresco
breaths in a chant
hunter presiding over winter
egyptian Osiris or
thief thrown to buzzards

Galileo is forgiven
his heliocentricity
four hundred years late
but what better punishment
than locked in a tower
nothing but to observe
listen to the disrupted
music of spheres

To fabricate
from his stale room
a new myth of the sky
imagine safe flight
for Icarus in cool moonlight
under the constant
historical clock
dependably inaccurate
unfinished sketches
of stars or air
bubbles in the lens

To be safe

Vita hominis est militia super terram.
Job 7:1.

I am meeting a friend
for fried wontons
at The Great Wall
west of the Ethiopian place
below the fur shop

I've known him since school
he read palms at parties
predicting sex and fortune
in pools of sweat
then offering
a drunken kiss on the hand
in hopes for his own
good fortune

He loves to do Tarot cards
for his grandmother
who doesn't go out much anymore
afraid of slipping
as her late-husband had
just before last Christmas

He takes
the *Morte* out
to be safe
though doesn't care
to store the cards
above heart level

•

Getting to the Wall
is an icy minuet
after sunset in January
roads reflecting frozen
headlight puddles

An assumed background
music of dainty
pizzicato strings
waltzing in 3/4
as cars twist and swim
in elegant, ineluctable choreography

At The Great Wall
they offer tea
but no one reads the leaves
my friend admits
he knows no more about tea
than sweat in the palm, meaningless
languages

Drink them, says the waitress,
good for you

Skating, 1976

On Grandpa's frozen pond in her
red toque pulled low, scarf tied
at her neck, cheeks red too and shouting
to the boys in moist clouds from her lips
- Faster faster Crack
the whip

She at least heard music, spun
on one blade that other leg stuck
out behind, arms out, compass too close
to the real pole. Boys heard Hockey Night
In Canada and the crack of sticks at what
we decided was centre ice. I laughed
into my leather gloves, they tasted like salt,
when her girl-skates made her fall forward,
her brother laughed more. We watched

from the kitchen. She waited until we finished, then
sang to herself, I could see the white breaths,
and spun around the ice
walking in her skates, maybe imagining
a partner, an audience. Once she came

in after too long, and her toe clicked
against linoleum in the kitchen
in time with the grandfather
clock in the parlour.

Not Identified

He is not identified
in the photograph of the Dauphin Juniors
hockey team 1926-27
squeezed between Captain Scrase
and George "Troque" Heard
who of course signed
with the Rangers, 1927

He is standing with the rest
wanting it looks to smile
but not sure if that's what you do
in a hockey photograph

wearing his jersey
proud flying D on his chest
real leather gloves
and shin pads
or maybe just thick magazines
stuffed down stripped socks

This is the decade before
threshing gangs made a dollar a day
and the depression
strangled the prairies
though hockey became more popular then
as fewer people worked

I couldn't tell you anything
about this hockey player
though he is preserved
in "Dogtown to Dauphin"

his life may have been
as crooked as "Squee" Heard's
who told the Rangers
that his brother Troque was a boozer

or it could have been
straight and simple
as his hockey stick

The proper mousing cat
is buried with soldiers

And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with bronze fetters; and he ground at the mill in the prison.
Judges 16:21

Doctor has warned against prose, poetry
could be fatal swallowing one's own tongue.
Puffy and strangled. And rigor mortis
in a Tantalus pose, book of verse

in hand. Retired then to the sun
lawn chair orange and green frayed warp
and weft nestling into dirt, the garden
once grew. Lettuce, parsley and carrots

for vision. Grass has grown
up around rusting red lawn
mower so little depends
upon. Children now
grown away, murder
of crows in the Basho tree, ripe with brown
fruit.

From the open patio door, saxophone Lester
Leaps In, the sound of spit air
over reed, disc player on
repeat. Open door frames
where she used to be, preparing
Shirley Horn's Beef and Beer, her

too stiff pavane around the kitchen just before
the beginning of sunset, early summertime
singing Una voce poco fa, at least
the tune. Lester reduced to a young man
vamping off stage at his first cutting

contest. Tarot cards always stored
above the heart. To be laid
late on Saturday night. After making
love, perhaps. The smell of sulphur

from struck matches, and sweat
and salt feel of love knots woven
into the Persian rug against lower
back and shoulder blades. A coded message:

come and kiss me, once. The little death,
always laughed, collected in a slick
balloon. The proper mousing cat

would purr and purr and purr, buried
now out back with the plastic
plank-foot soldiers. The youngest child once
dug a tiger trap, excavated lost languages,
spoke in new tongues. Funeral black, please,
for the soldiers and cat.

View to the west from the garden chair,
neighbour with the oddly
curved spine, from the decade spent
with children perched on her hips, also
climbing mountains at odd angles,
commas for eyebrows. Bent

over her full
heads of lettuce and climbing
sweet peas imagining her own well-kept

lawn. Known for her walk, and brown-
spotted skin under
sun glasses, straw hat, shorts the colour
of tuberose plants nestled against
the house. But in the lawn chair, contemplating

the Proposed Demolition of Nineteen Churches
in London. Three languages shored-up
in coves for later recovery. Beard
must surely start regrowing in all
this sun. Lester Leaps In.

A

Building a Loading Dock

Scraping away an epidermis of earth
reveals a tangled salad of iron
rebar and tree roots criss-
crossing the old
loading dock access

Years of English classes
flood useful and hopeful to mind
the art of nature the nature of art
truth is beauty beauty is truth
that is all I need to know
laid out in a loading dock autopsy
meta-phorical -physical -textual
Loads of dirt

scooped by front end loader
into a waiting dump truck
both drivers happily
smoking cigarettes
while pulling the strings
of ten ton marionettes
themselves puffing black smoke into the air
oblivious to the imminent revelation
of poetry

Sometimes opening a book
is like that, I say
gesturing toward the
salad of man and nature

A look from the foreman
as though he has just witnessed
a fatal collision of metaphors
and can I get the fuck out of the way

Reviving Tempera ("Winter Scene on Burlap, Alberta")

If a panel is well-prepared with Gesso and then painted on with powder colour which is mixed with fresh egg-yolk the result will be a paint film which dries almost instantaneously (making reworking difficult) and is also tough and permanent.

The smell of gasoline in brittle
air and burning oil. Blank January
straddling a snowmobile, etching
corrugated tracks across West of 14X snow-
erased flag, waves frozen into
hills, frozen towel on the line. And two

dogs at a distance drawn
by noise and smell. Witnesses,
winter scene, tempera
on burlap. Bone
vibrations from hooded motor

pain at the nape and finger
tips. Museum statuary of trees and
failing barbed-wire fences, imagining
decapitation or barbs
in the vocal cords.

Driving the Old East-West German Border, 1996

There are land mines still
underneath these sunflowers
grown old and rusted
asleep with the worms

Solitary like some forgotten colonel
alone in a dark house
after his purpose
is served can't remember
which side he was on

And there are still
no trees in no man's land
twenty feet on either side
of the new highway
though the dandelions and clover
have invaded
grown as if straight from the spines
of men and women
shot in the back
by the automatic pistols

Miss Meredith

The high whine of Harvard
training planes
over Dauphin Manitoba booming
in the early forties

summer blue sky
riddled with air force trainees
strafing concrete walls
bullet holes still
there like empty sockets

ordnance dummies delivered
into Lake Dauphin
hollow shells dropped in the summer
of '41 scaling away
below green lake water

Dan Craig 1st Lieutenant
in pressed white
aboard a Canadian corvette
sunk off the coast of Normandy
the first reported
death in the community

the son of a mechanic
his brother building runways
always on Saturday night
takes the car racing down
fresh tarmac
as if you couldn't just
keep driving forever

the first reported death
Miss Meredith's first assignment
delivering CNR telegraph's
knocking on doors tightly shut
even in mid-summer heat

Miss Meredith's footsteps
heard through windows
open to a slow breeze
the high whine
high blue sky her own
brother somewhere over Europe

Miss Meredith reads
the latest telegraph
to Mrs. Thomas Little
as they look over the rows
of her Victory Garden
growing vegetables
to supply the homefront
preserves for the winter

Angel scraps

She trades with her friends
after school under the umbrella tree
in our backyard

She trades a trumpeter
for one with rosy cheeks
and then rosy cheeks
for a double-set of wings

Once I spied on her
from behind
the tomato row
And when she left
her angel scraps book, I took
and buried it
Beside my soldiers
in a grave dug out
with the Tonka dump-truck

She cried with puffy
red eyes and cheeks
and I had to recover everything
from the garden

She ran away with
the angel scraps book
pulled to her chest, dirt
burrowing into her white
t-shirt and trailing
from the pages
of pressed angels

Circuit

The closest thing to a family
gathering watching television
Hockey Night in Canada on Saturday

- damn, he says from his
easy chair,
        this new remote can learn

- learn,
she cuts roses
out of thin taffeta
petals collecting
in a flat red puddle
on the dining room table

- you take your old remote
        point it at this new one
        and shoot new things into it
        new things it can do

I fumble with the old remote
tracing rivers between the buttons
imagine signals mouthed
through its plastic bubble
the television reading infrared lips

        I took it apart once
        took it to my room
        into the fort of blankets
        armour of cotton
        looked at the mute intricacy
        printed circuit a place
        for the battery

- look
she holds up her night's work
a handful of stiff rose petals
dripping through her fingers
in red wine drops

He teaches the new remote
to find his
favourite channels
watches Gretzky
ring one off the cross bar
sharp excited breath
echoed by the fans in Northlands Coliseum

Travelling Under the Ram's Belly

I.

Under a smiling one
eighths moon, I will take, O!
as my metaphor. Appearing less
than whole. And carved Cyclops eye.

The orange pickup truck is eager
in F-sharp, '83 Ford 150. Travelling with
the bass player who can hum
to anything, the engine

Jurgen's choral sostenuto. We've stopped
at a Shell on the Yellowhead, Alberta to
Manitoba, 6:14 pm. am radio and coffee
on the dash, the superposition

of winter. Grain elevators
like steeples of buried churches
grey daubed at sky. 12/21/96.
All is theatre. Framed

production. CBC constant as
the road a run-on sentence
transitory voices on unerring
waves. Fading in and out,

the Red Crosse Knight is under
his delightful tree, I am
sipping, through plastic, coffee
under a luminous seashell in December.

Pay for gas, coffee, the girl whose hair
is long and perfected as Botticelli's
name itself, speaking of and
why travel on these roads. - So long.

Let's go, coffee is dumped
Jurgen fishtails! for fun, Duessa,
she must be, off the Yellowhead is left
in her warm, inviting seashell.

II.

It starts with a dream
of swimming a burning lake
and labyrinths of sulphur
Miltonic olympics for the damned

running the 110 hurdles through
miasma of sulphur and smoke and
the alarm catches your heart I can
only narrate as if it happened to you

presses in a bear
hug you run from the house
into the portrait of winter
imagining erasure:

can I save anything. Books. Your family
running in pyjamas trying
to save each other. Praying to
what can, will be saved.

*

Gathered in a blanket, fire trucks
have scarred the blanket
of snow on the lawn. Our house
is retouched in coal black, burnt umber

fire up its face a star in the east
electrical outlet somewhere
chuckling. What is lost: carpet Christ-
mas tree, and the family albums.

*

moon I took O, then
whole. I take you again one-eighths,
winking Polyphemus, family history
I should but don't know. New, fear of

erasure, blinded: trapped in a cave
epic stone door. The orange Ford and Jurgen
into a second chorus attempting
harmony in C-sharp inviting even

diabolo in musica with his devil may care
hands at 10 and 2 tapping blues
triplets against a classical common
time, single speaker *Arts Tonight*

Beethoven's Grosse Fuge glare
ice on the road. Composed
with a deaf ear. Jurgen's smile
will not hear that sharp anger in B-flat

or warnings of slow down.
This is life, he says
110km/h in December snow
infinite angels against

the windshield in sea waves. He is
Greek and Danish, an unlikely
love grown from a textbook
of great wars. Roots like a mangrove.

III.

It is written
Pounded posts pounded
posts pounded posts:
great dance on fri

July 1, 1929. Grandfather's
diary bound in green leather de-
composing pages and rust gold
clasp. Great epic volumes

of pounded posts broken
ground bailed hay went to
Winnipeg Met her! played horseshoes
pounded posts cut wood, Durer's

evolution, cut wood cut wood. His heart
collapsed in 1984. Now she
likes to receive letters, pages of
another epic, another life. Her hand, still

gold banded wedding finger, poor ministry
for a mind still sharp still
too capable of memory. She writes
in her broken hand, *You*

should visit before Christmas. I'd
love to have you stay awhile. Bernice
is coming for lunch. Oh well,
have to clean up breakfast dishes

not much, just me. She is the one
left, can narrate the family
albums. Her knitted lips. The home-
stead in Spruce Woods Provincial Park

father's father's father
and family now bare outlines
explanatory sign and rocks in
the snow. Spines of the dead.

IV.

The Echo Motor Inn, 11:36pm, Jurgen
singing with the television. I
am framed in the mirror, eye
travelling my stunned reflection. There

must be family lines in my face
but where is that
resemblance everyone coos at.
How much like your father, but where

under skin are the roots
of family enknotted
this contexture of bone, nerve. What
gives this shape expression

expression shape. Odysseus and
his men escaped Polyphemus
riding the bellies of sheep into
a new morning. Cursed with tired

wind, but at least headed home. *That*,
says Jurgen, *would make a great*
song. He is travelling with me as
friend, *And I to him:*

You snuck with me, closed Picasso Room,
National Gallery; *lead me this way,*
and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate
no, better ride the tube with me, Charing Cross.

I need metaphor, take, along with my scanty moon,
Odysseus, Dante and his words to Virgil
for all of us travellers, epic
stellar or other. Going some-

where. What is my home. That watercolour
postcard? Re-sided, a couple grand
from the Wawaneesa Insurance Comp. Sure
but what about a history of voyages.

One of my ancestors drowned at sea
tempestuous and tall, thin and green as
England. *That would make a good song.*
Boatswain! Fall to't we run aground

his tale would cure deafness yet
he goes unwept, Edward King in the wash
of Milton, no Galilean pilot, only in
service of the crown. Death

unrecorded scattered bones picked
clean by scavenging fish, skull agape
and eyes of uncollected pearl. There has
been at least one successful voyage

from England to Canada
in the family, some time in history.
I shave, carefully. The mirror
steams from water in the sink.

V.

First stop in Manitoba, Grandma's
apartment declining into the western
edge of town. Small roads. Wombed
in the sitting room, stressed cabinet, bay

window out to wintered church across
the street. And she is talking
they met at a dance in Carberry, her hand
pouring tea shakingly. Walls frescoed

in exquisite needle work, Penelope's
luxuriant grief. Jurgen eyeing beach
and ocean scene. Monet assembled. *Bet this*
took forever. - Yes, more

tea? And I envision her hands
work the needle submerge, surface, sub-
merge surface in dolphin strokes
over a slowly forming sea, coastal foam

lace edging. There are still His
and Hers armchairs here for watching
television and the taking of tea. His
horseshoe trophies, and my family

portrait on the wall. We stay
a night and then go to church. Occasion
to dress-up. Airy wooden ceiling and stained-
glass knights. Christ the child

made Word. Made flesh. Made
family. All went to be taxed,
each to his own city. I am the last
of my line. I have no coast.

VI.

I have no coast. No point
of landing, of departure. No leg-
acy, no legend. Except what his
diaries unwillingly reveal, mere location

and what she will say. But this is
only plot, events, dancing on a floor
of horsehair under wood. No emotion, except
we loved the Tennessee Waltz, step slide

together. Under the halo of virgin
sodium light, then he goes back to
the farm near Glenboro, now provincial
park. Our orange Ford's north star,

and there will be the ruin of my first city
sentry poplars, winter flaking skin. Follow
she says, the footpath off the roadside
turn out. It should be there. A kiss goodbye.

VII.

We descend from the road, under
a sun, sucked lozenge, in the grey
matte afternoon. Breath inscribed and foot
steps momentarily. Lost. A blank

sheet of forgetting snow. This
is walking on an empty sea, reflection
on the moon. Mare Tranquillitatus. Mare Imbrium
the Sea of Rains, translated.

Spruce Woods Provincial Park. A picnic area
hibernation with bears, but chickadees
will congregate to their own music in
a social parliament discussing weather

politics and nest building. We make
our way down an old path, buried but
poplar lined and there are the spines
of my ancestors. Stone walls from home-

stead settlement. My coast is under
snow. These old stones capped
with snow, mountains in miniature, remains
scalable, conquered and named. A sign

Here marks the original settlement and home-
stead site May 30, 1896 Charles, Fanny,
Bill, John, Bert (Horace), Joe, Ruth,
Mary, Mabel, Fran. A century's susurrus.

And somewhere the true disarranged
bones of the dead. Buried with palaeolithic
flute and pteranadon; relative
dating. A textbook sediment un-

readable. Austen Henry Layard, his blind
Nineveh excavation, a library under burial
mounds wedge-shaped *Record of Darius*. Heaven
is a library, we are books,

opened. I am the last of my line. But
here is where it began again, another life
wheat rocks hand picked. Back aches
back breaking labour breaking new

ground. Staking claim and building
a house of stone. Canadian shield
etched with epic. Gilgamesh, one
third man, jealous in his walled Uruk.

VIII.

Under a revived night sky, shipwrecked
stars spell out myth of hunter, Diana
and sextant traveller. Back to Grandma's
tea in the easychairs a look through

her albums. She will speak in family
tongue, in my ear, in visions
of ancestry. Bards are not historical
figures. While Jurgen and I sing ascending

a hill, a song made up under some
astrological sign and blank O
moon.

B

Yusef Unpronounceable
(Tribute to jazz fan,
poet, *Yusef Komunyakaa.*)

First I'm trying to proclaim
that Benny Goodman might have been
the King
of Swing
but it was Johnny Hodges that night
Carnegie Hall, 1938, O
it was! Johnny Hodges
blowing so sweet so fast
pulling surprise after surprise
out of the white-rabbit hat
foreshadowing bop like walking away
from a spotlight
Hodges and all those scratching ticks
preserved by one mic above
me looking for the words
to describe the sound of every star
revealed in the sky slowly
the descent of the grid of night

me with tongue tied
around pen scratching
forwards for
words

opening
Yusef Komunyakaa's *Neon Vernacular*
opening the door to
music of poetry a concerto
jazz fan poet soloist

And again I've got to proclaim
I've found this guy
Yusef can't pronounce his last name
can't describe jazz poet-
ry tongue tripping over
like ears tripping over
the tripping lines
of Hodges in Carnegie, 1938

When It's Sleepy Time Down South

When the radio
whistles through the shotgun
house and Bird floats past
hummingbird fast
flyin' backwards
Louis' voice
like the gravel road
from school to home
trumpet floating up
from a state below sea level
some ragged-time band, ragging
the night. Time is sleepy

when the turning phonograph
replaces the clock
and the earliest scratchings
of jazz can be heard

a cd rainbows
the modern kaleidoscope
of compilations
and a digital clock on the shelf
flashes 12:00 12:00

the hum of the stereo up too loud
too late for neighbours
before the music hits
is like empty air through a sax
wetting the reed

sleepy time down south
just before the roar
of jazz

He does his routines

Every note is hot
and excited as New Orleans
down Basin Street bodies
clung to music
pouring over iron-
tatted balconies
from every open
door buildings shout to the street

Potato Head Blues
no blues, man, the big butter and egg man
every note is hot
stands out in Mardi-Gras reds and yellows
like white teeth against black skin
spread into a smile as theatric, the trick
he's swingin
into spotlights and riverboats
stop-time, rips into new variations
on old themes
I does my routines,
he says,
speaks through the trumpet
easy as breathing

Bix
(1903-1931)

Photographic black and white makes him
look quiet, young
his ears stick out
as if reaching. Cornet
resting on his knee

In the picture
he is 17, maybe
18, smiling, barely coaxed
out of a thought, a melody
a woman maybe where to get
new shoes. The tuxedo must be borrowed
as he never owned one

In high school
he received his first cornet
the hard edged trumpet
was announcing itself to jazz
in the hands of Armstrong

Bix never switched, he heard
jazz in the cornet and refused
or was too lazy
to change. His parents sent him
to Chicago
because he spent too much time
playing music
in Davenport, Iowa

•

Beiderbecke is sitting on the tracks
having drunk his share of corn booze
with Mezz Mezzrow and Pee Wee Russell
They have climbed over a barbed-wire fence
to dig up the hidden alcohol
Pee Wee gets hung up on the barbs
on the way back
Mezz struggles to get the gallon jug
away from Russell
while Bix sits to empty his shoes of sand

He doesn't hear or ignores
the train screaming towards him
Pee Wee and Mezz shout warnings but
Beiderbecke ignores them too

Yards before the train destroys him
Bix tumbles off the tracks
leaving his shoes to be sliced
by the wheels chopped
like with a meat cleaver
recalls Mezzrow

It ain't safe to undress, said Bix
having worn the same shoes for weeks

*

Bix is supposed to be playing
an Oklahoma tour with Paul Whiteman's orchestra
at 6:45am he's asleep on a train
headed the wrong direction,
telegraphs Whiteman
he'll fly into Ponca City
Bix and the pilot trade shots
of corn mash
on the flight over

A knot of musicians watches
as the vintage Jenny
circles to a cool
landing. The pilot passes out
as Bix and the musicians head
for the gig

*

His last days are spent
In an apartment, Sunnyside,
Queens, with bass player George Kraslow

Beiderbecke picks up the cornet
sometimes in the middle
of the night to play, cradle
the cornet like in the photograph
of a decade ago

Singin' the Blues and *Clarinet Marmalade*
once like shooting bullets at a bell
like the sound of a girl saying yes

the tunes are now just enough
for neighbours to hear
and remark to Kraslow
they were awakened past midnight

but don't mention it to him, they say
for fear he will stop playing

Ella Fitzgerald Died in a Foreign Language
(For Ella, 1996)
'Scuse me while I
disappear.

Her legacy is a skein of silk
from the Apollo to Jazz
at the Philharmonic, shifts in a legato sea
wind, the sun picks out high-
lights in a scat for the eyes.

I saw her picture in a German
newspaper, 1996 while travelling
I don't speak
German, except those tourbook phrases
she died at 88 as easy as a songbook
ballad, piano guitar bass, *Angel*
Eyes, I Loves You

Porgy. And I had nothing
to say but *Hello,*
I'm Canadian
Ich hissuh Jason

I know her from *Ella in Rome*
Ella in London at Flannigan's, speaking
in tongues and the concreteness of
location. Applause and Norman Granz'
terrible Italian from April 25, 1958
Teatro Sistina. I imagine it hot

and humid. She died in a language
so foreign, as distant as Rome
or those 78rpm shellacs, her first
recorded breaths. Yet another language
I need to learn.

Oscar's Conversation

Oscar is one of those players, sits
at the piano like he's on
a first date, though warming up
recognizing an old friend
not a new woman dressed
in a tight dress with mink

he begins again a nightly
conversation, in quick
breaths of where he's been that day
cold taxi ride and television
studio. And the stories of his childhood
easing out, and into another

chorus. His father, he remembers,
sitting in the parlour enshrined
in pipe smoke, reading-light halo
Victrola announcing through its horn
the scratching
sounds of Benny Goodman,
Paul Whiteman,
he is humming. Oscar enters the room,
a trader in the temple,
tells his father
- I'm going to be a jazz pianist
because math, algebraic straight
lines, only make sense when he hears them
curved in melodic trajectories, parabolic
Indiana, Stompin'
at the Savoy across staff lines

Oscar's father is ponderous
humming to the Victrola
as if he hadn't heard
but Oscar knows to wait
an answer will come
- Will you be the best,
he says.

And now Oscar is relating this story
to the piano humming the improvised melody
as he plays it speaking
the thousand thousand words
he might have shared with his father
instead of listening
to the Victrola.

A way with words
(for C. Baker)

I heard you off
key. Voice on egg shells
teeth knocked
out. The back room stairway
to your girl that night. Scotch
in your hand and trumpet

but you always had a way
with words. Told
Mussolini's son in Italy,
- It's a drag about your old man.

Then you took
a chorus. Away
with words, trumpet
bell to microphone a kiss
your scattered breath. Crooked
jaw and shoulders. Applause
before you play, solo
like a Sunday drive
in the straight-eight Buick
convertible. Ocean your rhythm
section. Suitcase in the back
travellin' light.

Who remembers jimmy noone

Born in 1895
died in 1944 a war year
Jimmy Noone is often remembered
for his sessions with
Bessie Smith, Empress of the Blues
who died in a car wreck, common jazz death
a passenger, Smith was killed
when her car hit a panel truck
parked on the side of the road
a doctor arrived at the scene
outside of Coahoma, Mississippi
the nearest hospital in Clarksdale
Smith's arm was nearly ripped off
she suffered head and
internal injuries
the white doctor began loading Bessie
she weighed upwards of 200lbs
into his car when it was struck
from behind
an ambulance arrived and took Smith
to the Negro ward at G.T. Thomas Hospital
in Clarksdale where she died
at fifteen minutes
past noon

Noone also recorded with
Earl 'Fatha' Hines
and was a favourite
of clarinetist, King of Swing
Benny Goodman

Body horn

One nestles up under his old
ribs, the other curls
across his thigh, guitar balanced
like a sonnet or engine

He speaks with it in winding
twelve bar sentences
each phrase an expression
love or disgust or the dog
on a hot porch

Drinking afterwards
in the cold bar
his fingers trace fragments
onto a half empty glass
half empty stories
black cadillacs and women

Mumbles to himself
not too loud
naked words are difficult
his jaw once broken
in Hazlehurst Mississippi

Hellhound On My Trail,

Hellhound On My Trail

I got to keep movin'
I've got to keep movin'
blues fallin' down like hail
blues fallin' down like hail

And the day's keep worryin' me
there's a hellhound on my trail
hellhound on my trail

Last fair deal gone
down

GET ROBERT JOHNSON. STOP.
SPIRITUALS TO SWING CONCERT. STOP.
late '38

ancestral scars another life
ruts in the old
roads, one levee town to
next black arts like portent
stars and the devil at the cross
roads belief and dis-
belief Mississippi
that river twisting
like a br oken guitar
string thr ough the delta

sky is cotton wet
stretched wet magnolia pecan cypress
mercury drizzling into the nineties
red dirt and the smell of up from the river
field hollers from hand
to hand kids' tin cans and string
dog bark from the porch

Phonograph Blues

cotton community houses plantation church clouds
like high cotton dust
choking the river and throat low front
buildings covered with building paper
scored to look like brick

Beatrice, she got a phonograph
and it won't say a lonesome word
Beatrice, she got a phonograph
and it won't say a lonesome word
What evil have I done
what evil has the poor girl heard

listen to the phonograph
what is that
! harmonica
what is that
! guitar
Robert and R.L. Windum field
hands on guitar and harmonica
noises of the mockingbird and nonsense
to make it rhyme
throats gone raw
best cure is vanilla ice-cream and bourbon

Walking Blues

went to work
        in the fields, he said, singing
- my wife's percolatin'
in the key of G

I woke
    up this mornin'
    feelin' round for my shoes
Know 'bout 'at I got these
    old walkin' blues

Me and the Devil Blues

Robert heard Ike Zinnerman learned guitar in the grave
yard at midnight sitting on the tombstones and Doctor Pryor's Alleged Hot Foot Powder
could keep away the devil sprinkled around the bed

round shoulders
long fingers like new-paved roads
skin a breeze could send
ripples across
had to turn his back
to hide what his hands were doing

Early this mornin'
when you knocked upon my door
Early this mornin',
when you knocked upon my door
And I said, "Hello Satan,
I believe it's time to go."

Robert takes
the stage

Travelling Riverside Blues

black brick on Walnut Street windows open curtains billow, singing in tongues at night
musicians passing through
Little Boy Blue Honeyboy Edwards Howlin' Wolf Johnny Shines

You can squeeze my lemon til the
juice run down my leg

before he died
he could make women
dance he could make the needle
inscribe his voice in shellac
his own voice his own
words a precious mirror
for his ears

I'm a Steady Rollin' Man

Johnson recorded a total of 41 tracks in San Antonio and Dallas, walked across the Alamo to get from his boarding house room to the dusty studio a room in the Gunter Hotel

picked up for vagrancy beat up guitar smashed by the police.

I'm lonesome
I'm lonesome, and there's a lady here
I lack's a nickel

Cross Road Blues

Three Forks,
Mississippi

Mr. Johnson is

centre of attention
his attention
on the jukehouse owner's wife
summer cotton dress sticky
between songs her shape is verse
verse verse turnaround repeat waiting
for Robert to fill she moves she hears
it knows it like Robert wrote it
guitar humms another life against his body he plays
the smell of sweat and whiskey
as the house heats up
up from the wooden floor

got to make these people

I went down to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
I went down to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy, now
save poor Bob, if you please."

on stage his throat
closes like the end of a day
he stops mid song with the crowd still
chanting his name Robert Robert Robert
as he expels his guts outside
broken-sealed whiskey pint

the night is buzzing warm
circles around the stormy moon
wet clouds crowding in

August 16, 1938

Last Fair Deal Gone Down

John Hammond wants him
Spirituals and Swing concert, Carnegie Hall, NY

the search begins for
Robert Johnson

September 13, 1938

It's the last fair deal goin' down
last fair deal goin' down
It's the last fair deal goin' down, Good Lord
on that Gulfport Island Road

Love in Vain

Johnson buried in the Zion Church cemetery
stone's throw from Mississippi Highway 7

the search begins begins again
photographs yellow and curled as memory
old men in shirtsleeves on benches
barbershops and cornerstore corners
old couple on the farm
their son pulling down
a wooden shack in the background

- there was a boy round here, stabbed
- yes, he was Robert
- then there was another boy name Robert
- yes, but he was shot and stabbed
- no Robert ever been poisoned
- one boy poisoned and stabbed but
he ain't called Robert

a death certificate
musician, 26, male, black, single
of death, no doctor
Robert L. Johnson

And I followed her to the station
with a suitcase in my hand
And I followed her to the station
with a suitcase in my hand
Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell
when all your love's in vain
all my love's in vain
- Robert L. Johnson

Song of Soliman

O that you would kiss me
with the kisses of your mouth

I. Soliman

Slow Avery Soliman cracks his eyes
open to the saran wrap heat
of July New Orleans sunrise after a night
he can't remember, finds himself

in an alley
underneath a washed out
Coca Cola sign
painted onto brick

finds himself laid
across his own
open guitar case, instrument
leaning against the alley wall

Soliman slowly remembers
his own song of the night before
the last swallow
from a jug of Russel's corn mash
backstage and the last quick pull
on Lazy's joint,
then on stage

and now the sounds of
New Orleans sunrise
packs his guitar
into the case and feels
for a cigarette

the sound of a cat house alive at 2am

of street criers crying
strawberries blackberries

how he plays his story
born in Commerce, Missouri

notices a broken string

his father a share cropper

hanging like a broken limb useless out of shape

a piece of land black and swampy good for cotton
paid half the take to Mr. Blanche who said Avery
always moved too slow

this part of the story finds Russel walking Lazy doing double time heavy on the kick and Soliman bending that E string up up till it should burst this the sound of Missouri sun on his back his father's face then a turn around choked in dust

shouts from the crowd

Corlus opens the barber shop for business
cutting hair and advice

Russel takes a chorus this the story of Poor Boy McGee sold his teeth to buy a horn, found he couldn't play, sold his horn to buy new teeth

now women the soft group talk of women as Soliman
makes his way back home up the street
his own house a shambling house
paint peeling
too tired to hang on
anymore under the sun
his wife sweating asleep

now Lazy his own chorus of rhythm and arms crossing still heavy on the kick heavy and a heavy and a heavy heavy this the story of rain dog days of heavy rain in Georgia born in a house haunted by his brother who drowned in a barrel full of heavy rain water his father shooting one bottle while pulling from another

Soliman arrives
home his wife
hears him come onto the veranda

Broke a string, he says
as she wipes sweat
from her forehead

II. Haile

She feels the heat
before waking up
it paints her
dream in slow washes
and admixtures

she sees the picture of her mother
paid two dollars
to reveal herself
to the camera
closed eyes and breasts, hands
grabbing one another
over the triangle of her legs

Haile can hear the scar
that runs through the photograph
the trick with a knife sliding, left breast
down into the cave
of her hands
a winding song raised
on skin, one of Soliman's
slow blues travels
inching from start to end
inevitable and unexpected
at every turn, in the long then quick
breaths of a man on a mattress
by the waterfront

Haile wakes to the sound
of Soliman on the verandah
she must remind him that Frank
Whitey Miller expects him for audition
in two hours

He shows her the broken string
- broke a string
she gets the suitcase from under the bed
spiders crawl from the corners
- remember Whitey today
she gives him a dollar
for a string and the drink she knows
he will buy anyway

In bed he sleeps
in Haile's depression
takes up her dream
bringing heat with him
from the day
plays the song
of her mother's scar
plays the song of two dollars humiliation
enough for bread fish heads and milk

They met in the back of a tent
listening to Bessie Smith
crying blues about
being in bed with ol' Jack
him with the .45
her with the knife
who could stay awake the longest

Soliman and Haile
awake together all night
still in the protected corn field
as men pull down the tent
Smith off to Memphis

they were hidden
under the blanket of sky
feeling the sunrise
Soliman twisting his long
sweating fingers through Haile's
as he asks her to marry him
move to New Orleans
where the great men live
she renames him Slow Avery
slow for his long fingers
finding their way over her skin

Haile could see herself
in the same ermine skin
that Bessie Smith wore
growing fat and happy
buying strawberries from the streetcriers
eating watermelon and tomatoes with salt
on the porch

iii. Whitey

Soliman arrives
at Whitey's house
his Sunday suit crooked and dusty
never got around to the new string
played without it
drunk
remembers Whitey's face
but not words
and the band
as sound disintegrates
can see his own fingers
move across the guitar
and only hope sound
is emerging properly

iv. The Road

Haile dreams
invasive heat driven
away, a new electric fan

Soliman on the road
with Whitey and his orchestra
sends postcards
but no writing
New York Philly and KC

She can feel
the song of the train
trembling through her
like Whitey's deep
finishing groans strong
pianist hands, the afternoon
after Soliman's audition

The suitcase is filling up
with Soliman's cut
from twelve dollars a night
the spiders have less and less room to live

v. Song

Soliman in his new suit
a Tuesday suit
steps off the train
collects his suitcase and guitar
heads home
in a wake of dust

Haile can hear him on the verandah
waits for him
to pull the blinds against morning
turn on the new electric fan
put his new guitar in the corner
and lie beside her

the lullaby of the fan
as they lie awake

A

Not alone in a stolen boat

A huge cliff upreared its head.

Hanging on the elm's biggest branch, out
over the pounded tin lake, too early
for anyone but the man selling Vegas
hole-punched playing cards. I cast

my long shadow
as you look for crabs among the green
rocks. This moment I can only promise
will be tricked-
up into something

resembling
something else. You
once found a boat, rowed us
out 'til ten o'clock
then back.
An archipelago of curved swimmer's
spines, dead man's float
and red caps. We had sun-

burns to show
and you a sliver in the web
of your hand, wanting it

to stay like an X on the treasure map
of your palm. I looked
as you showed it off.

Projectionist

A movie house fresh
emptied, the projectionist
rubs his old thighs and listens
to the sound of machinery
spinning an empty reel

he showed it just out
of focus hoping for complaints
he smells of false butter like
the mechanic smells of oil

quickly once in 1963 he took
her in the projection room
and she said she'd see him later
had to get back to the candy
counter, he ran Dracula with
his pants down and his shirt
button popped, he was Bogey
and she Bacall they spoke

in accents and the force
of hands against backs a sign-
language for the blind

I Miss Your Sense

of direction, the un-
folding of the sky, those
lines in your palms pressed,
encoded with an intrinsic
connection of stars. A map

of your touch laid on the dome
of heaven; it cracks over
the weight of absence, the smell
of your clothes in my closet. I look
for you in your car even
when I know we are countries
apart, and likely further. Faces
look too similar in panes

of rained-on windows. I opened
my suitcase in Boston, had
transported the scent of home
and your clothes twice removed
as I recognized you and something more
familiar. That night

I wandered past Mystic
Rosa's three times, the map was wet
from rain. Gentlemen alone in half-
open windows above, their backs struck
in poses of study, one lamp in the corner;
the clouds have confiscated your
hands, but night is somewhere
above them. The sound of traffic
and airplanes.

Almost asleep on the friday night couch

watching late tv
is like half
a can of diet coke
left on the counter overnight

the house has sunk into a rhythmic coma
from a week's overexertion
the furnace heaving breaths
every four and a half minutes

it might snow tomorrow
good reason never to open
the door again

even the bird is asleep
with its head twisted back
onto shortened wings

it may dream of flight
but probably not
having never left the cage

Convergence of Discovery
(The Manitoba Project)

"The frost performs its secret ministry, unhelped by any wind."
-Coleridge, *Frost at Midnight*

The International Nickel Company is the reason for Thompson Manitoba's existence. The company spent millions hoping to find nickel deep inside the earth. They stripped away trees, rerouted the Burntwood River, and built a hydro plant.

Convinced families to come
make it more than a mining town
the population grew from zero
to twenty-five thousand
in fourteen years the unnatural growth
of hope and prospect

I was born in Thompson, Manitoba
lived there five years
never travelled back
only read and heard about it
like wearing someone else's shoes

I am trying to discover un-
cover where I grew up memories
in the brain like ore
in a mine twisting underground
waiting for discovery
excavation, the furnace

Memory in the everyday
objects of my childhood
now dusty on shelves
their secret ministry
stories of my own past
they will tell if I listen

*

Kupfernickel, a term coined by 17th century Saxons searching for copper, translates roughly as "the Devil's Copper". Nickel was not what they were looking for but what they found. The hunt was on.

Explorers found nickel
in Northern Manitoba
the devil's copper spawned
town upon town

each dependent upon a deep hole
drilled to the centre of the earth
a path to darkness
scourged visible with a diamond-tip

Veins of metal in layers
dead rock compressed under
the pressure of life above

*

My hunt began with pictures
the clearest maps
of where we have been

I stumbled onto photo albums
the blind man
in blind man's bluff
hit on what I couldn't see
with the luck of a prospector

Pictures of me and snow
spread eagle angels on the front lawn
house reads 63 Riverside Drive
or me with a hockey stick
and frozen puck in the driveway

I remember going to watch men
skate on the outdoor rink
waiting for them to call me
steal the puck make a break for it
fire a blistering howitzer
past Alan Stanlaski
who worked at INCO
spent most of his days
two thousand feet below the surface
of the earth

*

180lbs. Brazil Tobacco, 300lbs. Powder, 200wt. Shott and Ball, 6 Gallons Brandy, 6 Gallons White Water, 2 Pecks Oatmeal, 12lbs. Bisquette

Samuel Hearne in 1774
pushing his way into Northern Manitoba
in search of anything saleable
for the Hudson's Bay Company

Breaking ground
breaking a trail of civilization
not realizing things already had names
Bimichikamach Lake renamed Cross Lake
and Moakasagahegan Cree for loon
shortened to Moak
easier to pronounce by the whites
whose story was told
for years on maps as though the names
they'd given had been original
baptismal

*

My dad tells me how we used to go down to the swimming pool - off Riverside, down past the community hall, Beaver Lumber, Safeway, then up the first street in Thompson, Juniper - pack up towels and a quarter for the locker. I remember an empty ocean of pool, waving black lines illusive on the bottom. Only me and dad. He remembers I was coaxed in but unprepared for the chest gripping cold and water up the nose.

I don't remember
not being able to swim

His story of the pool reminds me
We once stopped at Safeway
I forget for what
the bubble-gum looked too good to pass up

I explained that I'd left my quarter
where someone could find it
but we had to return
and apologize to long faces
smiling as though watching
a one-act play
I never got the quarter back

I met the cashier by fluke
two years ago a friend of my moms
she remembered me still smiles
with a long face said
I did get the quarter back

*

From the 18th century to 1890 and the goldrush, Northern Manitoba offered only fur to those brave or stupid enough to explore muskeg.

The north was a collection of pioneers
like Mike Madonick and his wife Margaret
Madonick's name misspelled
on his tombstone
a piece of granite from Painted Lake
Margaret stabbed a cross of her own
beside the stone
with the name correctly spelled

She taught their seven children
to read and write
He taught them
how to hunt moose and trap

•

1946 INCO began
prospecting in Northern Manitoba
aeromagnetic surveying
could locate ore bodies from the air
magnetic properties of different metals
like highlighted X's on unfurled maps

Prospectors relied on gut
and imperfect memory
Walter Johnson in 1949
followed a trail suggested to him
by Gordon Murray some twenty years earlier

Johnson made camp late one night
couldn't see anything in the dark
the blind man in blind man's bluff
woke up to find he'd laid his tent
next to a man's skeleton
dagger still embedded in the ribcage

'I knew I was close', he said
Johnson laid eighteen claims
in 1949, optioning them off
for $250,000 paydirt

•

While digging through
an old cupboard left alone in the basement
since we moved to Edmonton in '78
I discovered cars dusty Hot Wheels

a number 8 Lamborghini Countach
and a fire engine

Grandpa bought them for me
at the Bay in Thompson
the same Bay where I'd stuck my tongue
to a winter pole
for the first but not last time

I had forgotten about the Bay
but now remember
the taste of warm blood
after ripping myself away
then a mouthful of kleenex
to stop the bleeding

The Countach I'd always pronounced
count ache now I remember
my count ache number eight

•

Thompson's name was chosen, not for David Thompson, one of the first explorers into Northern Manitoba, but for Dr. John Fairfield Thompson, an INCO metallurgist from Brooklyn.

1959 Dr. Thompson to hand the nickel key
to Minister of Mines C.H. Whitney
key to the first Thompson school

But the key is mislaid
somewhere an hour before the ceremony
Thompson hunted endlessly
mining through pockets and drawers
couldn't come up with it
Whitney faked it with a pen-knife
but found the doors unlocked
the key good for nothing anyway

•

The name 'Thompson' first appeared officially in provincial documents of 1960. An agreement required Manitoba Hydro to construct a generating station to service the new mine site, in return for a low interest building loan from INCO.

The Manitoba Project
the building of a city
civilization
choreographed like a ballet
a mock duel in the movies

•

After the Hot Wheels
I looked for other objects
which survived the move
from Thompson to Edmonton

The long metal toboggan
standard issue in the north
but I always worried about snowmobiles
their angry buzz so close
ready to swipe you off your sled
grind you through tracks and gears

My kindergarten teacher was killed
in a snowmobile accident
an accident
the track gears and her broken bones
have been dissembled by time
into that word
as though it says it all

I am trying to build my past
with words like accident
neighbourhood community
building with cards in November wind

Piecing together tableaux vivant
scraps on the cutting room floor
a wilderness of half-
memory

•

The first two Thompson families left The Pas yesterday to take up residence in the nickel townsite. Before another month is out they are expected to be joined by others, and before the New Year at least one bank and possibly two will be opened on a temporary basis.

The Northern Mail, Oct.15/1958

The Hawkins moved
into an unnumbered house
on Juniper Drive in late '58
travelled in by train
a spur track from the main line
their furniture and car loaded with them
no roads yet

Nan Hawkins the morning after arriving
rescued her son
from a ditch by the train station
he had gone exploring digging into the deep mud
to see how far he could go

•

I promise myself every summer
to travel back to Thompson
explore through the muskeg
of Greyhound buses and highway spurs
until I find it find myself waist deep
in the mud of my childhood

I must be content to remember
the taste of blood on my tongue
the count ache number eight
my childhood as it is hidden
in the secret ministry of objects
that surround me everyday

•

INCO hired my dad
after 250 layoffs in two years
to re-train miners
it was a rebuilding
like adjusting your oxygen mask
underwater to make sure
you survive

There must be miles
of abandoned mine shaft
unexplored hidden below the surface

excavated earth left in piles
near Cooking Lake Painted Lake
Moak Lake and
Mystery Lake

Time Spent in Little Rooms
Alba for Alison

- Was word-play ever interesting.

I.
Nostradamus lost his family but saw it
coming. Stretcher bearers working
on credit. When we flew you bought life
insurance at the airport. But our flight south
was the smoothest ever, not even
the sound of ice cubes and spilled
vodka. A jet engine in your right ear, wasn't
it like waves against the stone sea

wall. I woke up earlier than you
and stood at the open window
air is strange, breathing the breath
of strangers and strange birds. I haven't
mastered sleeping with another
body, a-rhythmic. Sea gulls
are recognizable even as they make
war in sand and survey the tempered
ocean. Your breath is strange here

as strange as morning in your kitchen
which is white I remember, all white,
the noise of an empty house; the radio was
on all night.

When we had both drunk too much
sun in the afternoon we bought our names
written on a grain of rice. Then the discovery
of worms in yours, months later, curled like white
commas; when I smoke cigars
I imagine now you hate and love it, somehow.

II.
In a cold theatre on the river there is
Beethoven, Brahms the stone compiles
every performance and speaks each note
in increasing choirs. What would you have said
to that imagining, or to dirt on the church-
face. Or to Nostradamus and his water,
candle, and empty room. Smoke
and mirrors?

III.
I have perfected Claude-glass
walking and reflecting on the orderly
fore- mid- back-
ground

sunrise is framed by ship masts
in daylight you are as easy to love
as in twilight, where the eye half-creates
half-perceives - percreation -
and there is safety in frag-
mentation

in daylight you are no less
complete, the valleys of my own neck
reveal where I am unable to get
the razor, I could live in a climate
without windows
with wind only
in the morning as though light
travels on it companionable
onto the landscape of the one
sheet you have slept under unassuming

does a bird on the balcony
portend anything

IV.
Self portrait

What would he say
if he could speak in little
rooms, wander through that well-
numbered house; unmute

and who is it that scratches his own
name on dry skin, contemplating
age and the bookshelf

the teeth of the young lions
are broken; even that I've stolen;
they yawn in the morning harm-
and soundless

if you stumbled across lions
in the Book of Job, would I become
as clear as morning